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FOREIGN AFFAIRS

A Spook's Buck Is a Buck

By Flora Lewis

PARIS, Nov. 19 — A well-cast gunman, dark, handsome, neatly bearded and wearing a black leather jacket, emptied his Biretta at the U.S. Charge d'Affaires, Christian Chapman, as he was going to work here last week.

Fortunately, it wasn't a faultless script. The man aimed poorly, Mr. Chapman took cover quickly and escaped unharmed. The man walked away. Police found six empty cartridges, two bullet holes in the embassy car, and no trace of the would-be assassin.

The presumption was that he was sent by Col. Qaddafi of Libya because of reports that the Libyan leader ordered reprisals on U.S. diplomats in France and Italy for the shooting down of two of his planes over the Gulf of Sidra during the summer.

Mr. Chapman, now well-guarded, was remarkably cool about the incident and said firmly that the only way to deal with such things was to go on about America's affairs and "show we can't be intimidated." But, he added, he still felt as though he'd been in a bad movie.

That's the worst of it. Reality is blurring into melodrama and there is a tendency to react as though everything is a scenario good for a passing thrill.

A new politics-apocalypse novel called "Barrels" has come out here. The two Frenchmen who wrote it stick so closely to headlines that the U.S. Secretary of State is called Gen. Baigh, the Secretary of Defense is Heinenberg, and the Vice President is George Rusch. Similar minor changes identify Soviet, Chinese and Saudi leaders, and the book is so freshly baked that it includes the assassination of President Sadat — not terribly imaginative.

People are reading it in the way they used to read Nostradamus, "to find out what's going to happen to us," as a French friend put it. (Hint: it turns out bad but not the end of the world.) The passive acceptance of conspiracy and thuggery has leapt the bounds of fiction.

My point is aimed specifically at the bemused or helpless reaction to revelations about ex-C.I.A. agents who provided Colonel Qaddafi with fiendish devices and special training ostensibly developed to protect America from enemies. Edwin P. Wilson and Frank E. Terpil, the two men named, are hiding out in Arab lands. Nothing seems to be pressing in their case except the provision of news copy.

It remains unclear whether they had active cooperation from C.I.A. employees in giving their business of terrorist manufacture C.I.A. cover — an ironic reversal of secret agency. But they were able to buy the tools for "dirty tricks" from C.I.A. suppliers and to hire ex-Green Berets. Scarcely anybody seems upset because the laws don't forbid that.

The laws forbid naming C.I.A. agents or writing books about agency operations without clearance, and now the Congress is working on a law that will permit C.I.A. infiltration on the home front. But it isn't working on any law to punish people trained by the C.I.A. for putting their contacts and their expertise at the paid service of people who order the assassination of American diplomats.

Press inquiries into this extraordinary case indicate that the reluctance of the intelligence community to urge action stems from the buddy system. Old agents don't rat on each other.

That's scarcely different from honor among thieves, a stirring fiction, but here the subject is the real intelligence activities of the U.S. and the real lives of American public servants.

Meanwhile, Exxon has announced that it is pulling out of its oil operation in Libya, and Mobil is "reviewing" its deal there. But the reason is not patriotic indignation, nor even fear for the safety of employees. It is simply business as usual, bad business now because Libya's extra-high oil prices are causing losses to the companies in the current soft market.

There is no shortage of American denunciations of Colonel Qaddafi for his preference for violence and bribery in the conduct of foreign affairs, nor even of dark rumors to frighten him with plots against Libya. But there has been a remarkable shortage of disgust at the ease with which American agents have moved on to private enterprise with anti-American clients.

Only a few years ago, Congress and the public reacted strongly to corrupt practices of U.S. companies abroad that pleaded they were only doing what others did to get ahead.

Mr. Terpil, interviewed in Beirut recently, had a succinct answer to the question of how a man goes from working for his country to becoming "a renegade spook for hire."

"A buck is a buck is a buck," he said, and once a person is a spy, "that's his only, that's primarily his livelihood, that's what he knows."

The far more important question is: how has a country come to tolerate teaching its citizens to kill and deceive on the public payroll and then go into the same business for themselves when the price is right? Or have we become so mesmerized by the cynicism of fictional skulduggery that we take for granted such things will happen and there's nothing to be done but switch the channel and the story?